

50-Day Strike Ruined Angels' Season

By Martin Felsenfeld

When then-manager Jim Fregosi was asked about how his California Angels would do in 1981, he said something like this: "Assuming that there is no baseball strike, I feel that we have a good chance to win 80 or more games and bring back the respect we had two years ago, when we won the pennant."

But, as things turned out, Fregosi was wrong. The Angels played enough games to win 80, but finished with an overall 51-59 record. A 50-day players' strike that began on June 12 ruined the Angels' 1981 season. And Fregosi would not be around for the players' strike. On May 28th, the team fired its former shortstop who became manager on June 1, 1978. Fregosi led the Angels to their first Western Division title in 1979, but in 1980 his team was next-to-last in the division. When Fregosi was fired on May 28th, the team was 22-25.

Replacing the now-former Angels' manager was Gene Mauch, the former Philadelphia, Montreal, and Minnesota skipper who started the '81 season as Director of Player Personnel. Mauch, after taking over as manager, led the Angels to a 9-4 record when the strike suddenly came.

With the owners approving the vote on a split-season, the Angels were 31-29 in the first half, finishing six games behind Oakland, who won their first 11 games at the start of the season for a new league record. The split-season meant that the first-half and second-half champions in the division would be facing each other in the divisional playoffs.

Unfortunately, the Angels' nemesis of the past several years, Kansas City, got the honor in the second half. Although only 8½ games behind the Royals, California finished the second half in last place with a 20-30 record.

Winter trades after their pitiful 1980 season appeared to be the Angels' answer. They made two deals with Boston, the first one sending outfielder Rick Miller, pitcher Mark Clear and infielder Carney Lansford to the Red Sox for infielders Rick Burleson and Butch Hobson.

More than a month later, the Angels sent unhappy pitcher Frank Tanana and outfielder Joe Rudi to Boston for Fred Lynn and Steve Renko. Rudi's trade to the Red Sox meant the end of a personal five-year wait for him. Rudi originally was to have played for Boston in 1976, after several years with Oakland, after the then-A's owner, Charlie Finley, sold him to the Bosox with pitcher Rollie Fingers, while pitcher Vida Blue was being sold to the New York Yankees, but Commissioner Bowie Kuhn turned the deal down three days later. Lynn, a former star at the University of Southern California, was delighted to be returning home.

How did the deals turn out? Well, Burleson was a consistent player all season, playing in every Angels' game but one. Burleson batted .293, trailing only Bobby Grich at .304. By mid-July, Burleson was hitting .305. He led the club in hits with 126.

The other players, though, were not as lucky as Burleson. Hobson batted just .235 for the season, including .154 in the second half. Lynn was plagued with injuries all season and the former MVP in the American League (1975) batted just .210, an easy all-time low for him. Two knee injuries during the season limited him to just 76 games.

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which was hit by a pitch in a June 6 game against his former team, the all-innings doubles, and was expected to be out of action for at least six weeks. With the possibility that Grich would miss at least forty games, he missed only ten all season because a week after his injury, the strike came. Bobby hit 22 home runs to share the league lead with three other players, and drove in 61 runs.

Largest comeback for the 1981 season was Brian Downing. Isolated for all but 30 games with an ankle injury in 1980, Downing returned himself as a respectable player, batting .249 with 9 homers and 41 RBI's, including his first-ever grand slam homer.

Don Baylor slowly started his comeback from a dismal 1980 season with 17 homers and 66 RBI's, but his batting average was only .239.

Rod Carew, for the 13th consecutive year, posted a .300-plus batting average for the season (.305), including his 2,500th base hit on September 26th against Toronto. Ironically, on that same day, former Angel Nolan Ryan, with the Houston Astros, pitched his fifth career no-hitter for a new major league record.

But there were disappointments, too, coming behind the plate and on the field. Ed Ott, a catcher obtained from Pittsburgh and expected to be the starting catcher for the Angels, was just that, but hit only .277 in 75 games. The Angels, as a team, committed 100 errors, second most in the league.

Pitching improved somewhat after two off-seasons, but still became a majority of frustration. Newcomers John D'Acquisto, Ken Forsch, Jesse Jefferson, Steve Renko, Bill Travers, Mike Witt, and Geoff Zahn joined the team in 1981.

But only Forsch, Renko, Witt, and Zahn came up with respectable seasons. Forsch was 11-7 with a 2.88 ERA, Renko 8-4 with a 3.44 ERA, Witt 8-9 with a 3.21 ERA, and Zahn with a 10-11 record and his ERA was 4.41.

On the other side of the coin, D'Acquisto, Jefferson and Travers had a combined total of 2-5 record, with only Jefferson getting the two wins. D'Acquisto was ineffective in six games and did not have a decision as his final ERA before being sent to the minors was 10.71. Travers, whose ERA was 8.38, pitched one-third inning short of ten when elbow surgery put him out of the lineup.

On a team whose ERA average was reduced to 3.71 after a dismal 4.52 in 1980, Bruce Kison started a comeback with a 1-1 record in 11 games. He missed the last half of 1980 and the first half of 1981 with an elbow injury, and no one was sure on whether he would ever pitch again.

Despite the turmoil, the Angels were still in the pennant race in the second half, and on August 26th, they began a crucial 14-game road trip just 1 1/2 games out of first place. In their first eight games of the trip, against Baltimore, Boston, and Cleveland, they were 4-4 and only one-half game out of first. But they lost their last six games on the trip, and at home they extended their losing streak to eight before finally winning again. A six-game losing streak after that ended the Angels' hopes of winning a pennant for Gene Mauch, whom had never won one himself in 21 years of managing in the major leagues.

Now in 1982, with three more key players joining the club, including Reggie Jackson after five seasons with the New York Yankees, this could be the year for Owner Gene Autry to get his first-ever A. L. pennant.